

# **7 FAM 500 SERVICES FOR OTHER FEDERAL AGENCIES AND FEDERAL BENEFITS FOR U.S. CITIZENS ABROAD**

## **7 FAM 500 (This is under the OLD Numbering Scheme)**

### **7 FAM 501 INTRODUCTION**

*(TL:CON-9; 9-15-84)*

Entitlement to Federal benefits is mandated by Federal law. The laws specify who is entitled to benefits, the amounts of entitlement, and conditions that must be met to receive benefits. Each Federal benefits-paying agency establishes policies and procedures under which the laws are administered. When these policies and procedures must be applied outside the United States, the agencies require the assistance of Foreign Service personnel.

This segment of the consular volume of the Foreign Affairs Manual is a guide for the consular officer who supervises Federal benefits work and for the performing officer's supervisor. It describes the day-to-day work process, gives suggestions for reviewing the operations, and explains the responsibilities of the officer in charge. It also discusses consular interactions with outside groups whose continued cooperation is needed to administer Federal benefit programs effectively in foreign countries.

### **7 FAM 502 AUTHORITY AND RESPONSIBILITY**

The Department acts as the representative abroad for several other Federal agencies under authority of 22 U.S.C. 3904, which states:

"Members of the Service shall, under the direction of the Secretary

(1) represent the interests of the United States in relation to foreign countries and international organizations, and perform the functions relevant to their appointments and assignments, including (as appropriate) functions under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, other international agreements to which the United States is a party, the laws of the United States, and orders, regulations, and directives issued pursuant to law; (2) provide guidance for the formulation and conduct of programs and activities of the Department and other agencies which relate to the foreign relations of the United States; and (3) perform functions on behalf of any agency or other Government establishment (including any establishment in the legislative or judicial branch) requiring their services. (Pub. L. 96-465, Title I, Sec. 104, Oct. 17, 1980, 94 Stat. 2076.)"

Specific authority is cited in the section of this chapter that discusses each Federal benefits-paying agency. Responsibility for performing services requested by these agencies, or on behalf of their clients abroad, rests with the consular officer at the post.

## **7 FAM 502.1 Expenditures**

a. Services for other Federal agencies are performed without reimbursement as a regular part of the basic consular responsibility of the Department and Foreign Service. However, when the service entails a significant identifiable cost to the Department, in addition to normal post operations, it may be possible to charge these costs to another agency. Posts experiencing a permanent and significant increase in workload as the result of services performed for Federal agencies must advise the Department and the affected Federal agency of this fact with appropriate recommendations.

b. Other expenditures for medical treatment, travel, and related expenses are made only when authorized in advance by the agency being served. (The Veterans Administration makes certain exceptions to this general rule; see section 7 FAM 530 .) The authorization by an agency should identify the beneficiary, specify the amount and the purpose, and in some instances provide specific accounting data for use in settling the account. The consular officer sends the authorization to the post cashier, who settles the account for the agency when the statement is presented, unless the agency requires that the statement be submitted to it for direct payment to the claimant. Unless specific accounting data have been provided, authorized payments are made and accounted for as required by 4 FAM 335 .

c. Travel, per diem, and related expenses incurred by Foreign Service personnel in performing a field examination or other requested service is charged to the agency that requested the service. Such travel is performed under the Foreign Service Travel Regulations ( 6 FAM 100 ). Prior authorization to incur the costs of such a service shall be obtained from the requesting agency.

## **7 FAM 502.2 Fees for Notarial Services**

Notarial services needed by a person in order to comply with instructions of a Federal agency are normally "no fee items" (see Item 58, Tariff of Fees, Schedule of Fees). Notarial services on behalf of the Federal agency also are "no fee items."

## **7 FAM 502.3 Disclosure of Information**

a. Federal agencies disclose information from their files only as permitted by the Privacy Act of 1974 (5 U.S.C. 552a) and by procedures published in the Code of Federal Regulations. Requests for information under the Freedom of Information Act of 1966, as amended (5 U.S.C. 552), should be referred to the appropriate Federal agency or to the Department, depending on the circumstances (see item c below for one exception).

b. Services for Federal agencies often involve privileged information that may not be revealed by the consular officer to a person being interviewed or undergoing medical examination. The agencies often provide background information to assist the consular officer in performing the service requested or to assist the physician in conducting a medical examination. The content of requests for services and results of any investigation or medical examination must not be shown or revealed to the person being interviewed, investigated, or medically examined without referral to the Federal agency concerned and the Department for instructions.

c. If a member of the public, including the subject of the file, or a foreign government official requests information from the files of another government agency, the person is informed that a written request should be mailed directly to the agency concerned, unless that agency has already authorized the post to release the information. An exception to this rule is to provide a person with a statement about SSA, VA, OPM, or other agencies' benefits that the person receives through the post which might be needed to satisfy a requirement of the local government in relation to the person's continued residence in the foreign country.

## **7 FAM 502.4 Performance of Services**

a. The post should assist clients of Federal agencies in completing and filing forms required for claims or benefits.

b. When the post investigates a situation for another Federal agency, it reports its finding directly to the agency. Normally, the post does not initiate an investigation, but consular officers must be alert to any unusual practices or situations in which fraud or improper action is suspected and report them directly to the interested agency and to the Department.

## **7 FAM 503 DEFINITIONS**

Definitions commonly used by individual Federal agencies are provided in the sections of Chapter 500 that discuss the benefits functions of those agencies. The following definitions apply to all Federal benefits-paying agencies:

a. "Agency" means any executive department, Federal Government-controlled corporation, or other establishment in the executive branch of the Federal Government, or any independent regulatory agency involved in dispensing Federal benefits to U.S. citizens and aliens abroad or requiring services on a regular basis from Foreign Service posts. (On occasion, assistance is given to State agencies.)

b. "Alien" means any person who is not a citizen or national of the United States.

c. "Beneficiary" means one who receives something of benefit, such as income from a trust; a person named, as in an insurance policy, to receive proceeds or accruing benefits.

d. "Benefit" means a financial or monetary advantage for profit, or assistance in times of illness, loss of employment, old age, and the like.

e. "CA/OCS/CCS" means the Directorate of Citizens Consular Services in the Office of Overseas Citizens Services, Bureau of Consular Affairs.

f. "Claim" means a right to something, such as a title to a debt, privilege, or annuity; a demand for something believed to be due, or calling on another for compensation or something else believed to be due, often in compliance with the provisions of a workmen's compensation law or insurance policy.

g. "Claimant" means a person who asserts a right or entitlement to a benefit or compensation.

h. "Claim number" means the case number assigned to identify a particular claim for benefits or assigned to an account that is the subject of a claim for benefits.

i. "Citizen" means a person who owes permanent allegiance to a country and is endowed with full political and civil rights in the body politic of that country.

j. "Federal benefits" means benefits available on application from Federal agencies to persons who establish their entitlement to such benefits (see also item 503d).

k. "FBO" (Federal Benefits Officer) means a Social Security Administration officer temporarily assigned to the Department as a consular officer, who supervises and coordinates Federal benefits work performed at a number of Foreign Service posts in a designated geographic region.

l. "FBU" means a Federal benefits-processing unit at a Foreign Service post.

m. "Field contact" means a limited or full-scale personal inquiry or investigation, about a Federal benefit claim or Federal agency request, at a location distant from a Foreign Service post to establish entitlement of an applicant or beneficiary for Federal benefits. The contact is made by a Federal benefits officer or a Foreign Service national employee designated to serve as an investigator.

n. "FSN" means a Foreign Service national employee.

## **7 FAM 504 MANAGING THE FEDERAL BENEFITS UNIT**

This section discusses some of the basic management concerns that the consular officer in charge of an FBU must deal with on a daily basis.

### **7 FAM 504.1 Objectives**

The consular officer should set the FBU's sights on the three main goals:

public service; integrity of benefit payments; and economy of administration. These goals should be discussed with FBU employees and each should keep them in mind. The discussions should lead to a set of specific goals for improving the FBU's effectiveness and efficiency. The goals should be aimed at correcting any shortcomings disclosed by the review of FBU operations (see section 7 FAM 505 ). Short-range objectives that can be accomplished within 6 months should be written down and assigned as "action items" to the persons responsible for carrying them out. The progress of each action item should be reviewed at appropriate intervals to ensure that problems or delays are brought to the officer's attention and that the officer is aware of the accomplishments.

#### **7 FAM 504.1-1 Effective Communication With Employees**

##### **a. Essential to FBU Operations.**

The consular officer must maintain effective two-way communication with each FBU employee. This is true even if there are only 1 or 2 employees engaged in Federal benefits work. Periodic meetings and informal discussions of work-related problems are essential if the consular officer is to keep abreast of problems that require the officer's attention. The working relationship should be such that the officer will be apprised of potentially explosive situations before they reach a crisis. In addition to keeping aware of the problems and needs of the FBU employees, the officer must be responsive to these needs. The supervisory officer's personal attention is required in all matters of basic policy. The officer also should be informed of complaints or commendations from the public, personnel problems, fraudulent claims activity, and matters in which the officer has a special interest.

##### **b. Signing Correspondence.**

To help clarify working relationships, the consular officer should specify at what level various types of correspondence are to be signed in the unit. While the benefits-paying agencies have authorized the FBU staff to sign most forms and other routine correspondence, the supervisory consular officer must review frequently the daily correspondence to protect the integrity of the payment programs and to evaluate the employees' work.

## **7 FAM 504.1-2 Manageable Workloads**

a. It is essential that the consular officer be aware of the level of pending work in the FBU and take action to prevent it from becoming unmanageable. Depending on the volume of Federal benefits work, the officer may wish to rely on monthly workload reports routinely prepared in the FBU or on periodic reviews of the pending files to monitor the workload.

b. If pending work threatens to exceed a reasonable level, the officer should take action to reduce the backlogs by adjusting priorities within the FBU, by getting temporary assistance from another unit, or by obtaining authorization for overtime work. Because backlogs create additional work in the form of complaints and requests for status reports, workloads should be managed carefully. In some cases, temporary measures should be supplemented by a request for additional personnel if the need is continuing and can be documented.

## **7 FAM 504.1-3 Time Savings Measures**

a. The consular officer should be alert to suggestions that can increase the productivity of the FBU. For example, a form letter may be used for transactions that previously were typed individually. A rubber stamp may help to avoid the repetitious writing or typing of legends, such as certifications of photocopies of documents. The telephone can be used to greater advantage in reaching persons who do not respond to mailed inquiries. A long distance call often costs much less than a field trip or repeated, but nonproductive correspondence.

b. The group interview is an expedient that the officer should consider when the office is filled with people waiting to see FBU personnel. If something unusual has happened, such as a check shipment that was delayed or a change of law that has aroused public interest, a group explanation might relieve the pressure on the FBU. Also, when people receive the annual enforcement questionnaires, group interviews may be necessary to deal with overflow crowds seeking assistance in completing the forms.

c. These are only a few of the countless time-saving measures that might be used to advantage by an FBU. The consular officer, as manager, should encourage innovative ideas and be quick to try changes that promise to increase productivity and further the objectives of the FBU.

## **7 FAM 504.1-4 Training**

### **a. Need for Training**

Training is needed by Foreign Service officers if the Department is to develop greater knowledge of a responsibility which, because of the increasing amount of monies disbursed, is of growing importance in the conduct of U.S. foreign relations.

### **b. On-the-Job Experience**

This is the most practical and cost effective method of learning, and consular section chiefs should always provide opportunities for exposure to Federal benefits work as part of the general training process. Junior officers in rotational jobs and, in fact, all junior officers assigned to consular sections (especially those where FBOs are stationed) should spend some time in the FBU becoming acquainted with the work. Even a short stint in the section is recommended.

**c. Observation and Field Trips**

In a single month, for example, a consular officer could observe check distribution operations, sit in as an observer “on the line” with a claims taker (and perhaps even perform as a claims taker on occasion), and accompany a field representative on field trips to the far reaches of the district. One such trip should be required for every new officer at a post, both for educational and for fraud prevention purposes.

**d. Technical Training for FSNs**

Consular officers should also see that Foreign Service national employees receive the technical training needed to process Federal benefits work accurately and rapidly. On-the-job training by the experienced staff is the common practice, but such training can often be supplemented by training programs arranged and/or conducted by the FBO's.

**e. Cross-Training**

It is very important for FBU employees to be cross-trained, so that one can back up the other in case of sickness, vacation, or other absence. If the Federal benefits work is being done by only one employee, it is essential to assign backup responsibility to another employee and to see that the second employee is well enough trained to keep the operation going for extended periods if necessary.

## **7 FAM 504.1-5 New Instructions**

The consular officer should be alert to the arrival of new airgrams or other notices about changes in procedures that affect the FBU. The officer must see that such new instructions are understood and applied by the employees concerned. Brief meetings to discuss new instructions are an invaluable way of ensuring that this is done. Often technical assistance can be obtained from the regional FBO.

## **7 FAM 504.2 Internal Controls**

The consular officer must control Federal benefits work so as to avoid waste, fraud and mismanagement. As with other consular activities, it would be untenable to leave control of the program solely in the hands of the FSN employees, and to do so is inherently unfair to them. Therefore monitoring the internal security of the Federal benefits operation should be one of the officer's primary objectives. The following subsections present guidelines for organizing and monitoring a post's internal control system.

### **7 FAM 504.2-1 Control of Records**

All FBU records should be controlled to ensure that they cannot be examined or tampered with by persons who have no right of access to them. The records should be locked in a secure cabinet or room when they are not under the direct observation of the FBU employees and/or their supervisor. The records should be readily accessible to the consular officer, who should review them from time to time to assure proper maintenance. They should be destroyed as scheduled in the Records Management Handbook, Appendix B, and treated as classified material.

### **7 FAM 504.2-2 Control of Checks**

The consular officer should ensure that procedures are established to control and account for benefit checks received by the FBU. Procedures may differ among posts, depending on such factors as the size of the staff and whether the post has been designated for check distribution. The minimum requirements are that access to checks should be tightly controlled and that the FBU should keep records for a suitable time after the checks have been received and distributed. Further details on check handling are given in sections 7 FAM 506.2 and 7 FAM 510 . A few points are mentioned here:

(1) When the FBU receives the monthly bulk shipment of checks, the accompanying list of checks should be date stamped and kept for 1 year. The list is evidence of the checks received for distribution.

(2) Before the checks are mailed, an employee pulls the form OF-273 file cards (Change in Status for Federal Agency Beneficiary; see section 7 FAM 506.6-2 a), which show special handling requirements due to changes of address, death, and so forth (see sections 7 FAM 506.2 and 7 FAM 510 for detailed discussion on uses of the OF-273 (formerly the RO-35).

(3) If a check is held temporarily in the FBU (for example, if the beneficiary was granted temporary permission to pick up the check personally), the checks should be kept in a special "check-holding" file which must be locked when not in use. Bulk shipments received too late in the day for mailing must be locked up overnight. Miscellaneous checks received should be mailed the same day.

(4) Persons authorized to pick up their checks should be required to show evidence of identity and to sign the OF-273 or the list of checks as proof that the checks have been delivered. Individual pickups should be kept to a minimum if domestic postal systems are reliable.

(5) The consular officer should regularly monitor the list of checks, the OF-273 file, and the "check-holding" file to be sure that proper procedures are being followed.

## **7 FAM 504.2-3 Security of Checks**

To provide greater physical security over benefits checks and to protect the employees involved, the following procedures should be implemented at all posts involved in handling federal benefits checks:

(1) Secure areas should be provided for screening and holding the checks in the FBU's. Checks should not be screened in the employees' private offices or left in locations where the public has even limited access to them.

(2) The monthly bulk distribution process should be carried out in one secure location, preferably with a supervisor present. To the extent feasible, a minimum of 2 employees should be present during the process.

(3) Checks released from the Federal benefits unit to the mailroom should be sealed in a closed package or envelope directed to the communications programs officer (CPO), who should ensure that any indication of tampering with the package is immediately reported to the Federal benefits unit.

(4) Checks which are to be returned to the Department of the Treasury must immediately be stamped "non-negotiable" over the disbursing officer's signature.

## **7 FAM 504.2-4 Control of Medical Examination Procedure**

As required by their programs, the Federal benefits agencies will request the FBU's help in arranging independent medical examinations. Instructions for processing such requests are given in the sections dealing with the individual agencies. The consular officer must ensure that such examinations are performed by qualified, unbiased doctors for fees that are reasonable for the locality. To monitor the medical examination procedure, the consular officer should:

- (1) Know how the doctors who perform the medical examinations were selected and how their qualifications were established;
- (2) Ensure that a complete list of the doctors with their specialties is available in the FBU (see 7 FAM 300 );
- (3) Ensure that the doctors understand the purpose of the examinations and that their reports should be objective;
- (4) Ensure that the doctors understand that their fees for the examinations must not exceed the usual rate in the locality;
- (5) Review the doctors' reports and bills;
- (6) Review and approve the reimbursement vouchers to the extent permitted by the individual agencies; and,
- (7) Consider the use of medical clinics to conduct examinations.

## **7 FAM 504.2-5 Control of Refunds and Other Payments**

a. As a corollary to antifraud efforts, the Department assists the Federal benefits agencies, as necessary, with the collection of overpayments. Heretofore, the paying agencies wrote directly to overseas beneficiaries, but with mixed results. In the future, these agencies will turn more frequently to consular officers for help with collections abroad. Specific instructions for handling cash refunds for the Social Security Administration (SSA) are given in subparagraph 7 FAM 504.2-5 f.

b. The consular officer must ensure tight control and accountability of all overpayment refunds and other payments received for Federal agencies. The officer should designate the FBU employees who are permitted to receive and process such payments.

c. Individuals can remit funds to a Federal agency in several ways:

(1) The simplest and preferred way is payment by bank draft in U.S. dollars. Individuals can send payments via international mail directly to the appropriate agency. A copy of the Federal agency's dunning letter should be returned with the payment and the beneficiary's claim number should be on the check. See addresses in subparagraph (5) below.

(2) If dollars are not available and local currency cannot be converted into a dollar instrument by the debtor, collection of the local currency equivalent by the post is permitted. Regular budget and fiscal (B and F) collection procedures stated in 4 FAM 320 et seq. should be followed. If this last method is used, the consular officer must be sure the agency is provided with a precise accounting of the funds and is advised when the funds are being returned.

d. Handling these funds requires a good control system that should include the following elements:

(1) A receipt should be prepared immediately when the refund or other payment is received. At minimum, the receipt should show the amount of payment, date received, Federal benefits claims or case number, and signature of the FSN employee or the B and F officer. The original receipt should be given to the person making the payment. One copy of the receipt should be sent to the Federal agency with the payment, and one copy should be kept in the FBU for 1 year.

(2) Every effort should be made to convert cash payments on the day received (see 4 FAM 323.3 ). When same-day conversion is not possible, the cash should be locked up securely with the receipt and converted on the next workday.

e. Individuals who send payments directly to the agencies may use the following addresses:

(1) Social Security Administration

(a) Checks should be payable:  
to

Social Security  
Administration

(b) Send checks to:

Social Security  
Administration  
Division of International  
Operations  
Post Office Box 1756  
Baltimore, Maryland 21203

(2) Railroad Retirement Board

- (a) Checks should be payable to:

Railroad Retirement Board.

- (b) Send checks to:

Railroad Retirement Board  
Bureau of Retirement Claims  
844 Rush Street  
Chicago, Illinois 60611  
ATTN: Payment Services Unit,  
Room 715

(3) Veterans Administration

- (a) VA dunning notices will include the address to which refunds should be paid.

- (b) Most beneficiaries will be asked to send payments to the Veterans Administration, Centralized Accounts Receivable System (CARS) St. Paul, Minnesota

(4) Department of Labor (Black Lung Program)

- (a) Checks should be payable to:

Labor - OWCP/DCMWC.

- (b) Send checks to:

Fiscal Officer  
U.S. Department of Labor  
ESA/OWCP/DCMWC  
Post Office Box 37227  
Washington, D.C. 20013

Act) (5) Department of Labor: OWCP/ FECA (Federal Employees Compensation Act)

- (a) Checks should be payable to:

Department of Labor - OWCP.

- (b) Send checks to:

Branch of Special Claims  
U.S. Department of Labor  
Post Office Box 208608  
Washington, D.C. 20005

(6) Office of Personnel Management

(a) Checks should be payable to:

Office of Personnel Management.

(b) Send checks to:

U.S. Office of Personnel Management  
Compensation Group  
Funds Control Section  
Post Office Box 582  
Washington, D.C. 20044

f. The procedures to be used for handling cash refunds for the Social Security Administration (SSA) are as follows:

(1) Beneficiaries can make refunds through the FBU and Class B cashier at post in local currency or in U.S. dollars.

(2) An enumerated receipt (OF-158, General Receipt, see 7 FAM 050 ; formerly FS-429, or their equivalent) is given to the beneficiary, and the post cashier forwards the copy of the receipt to the post's Budget and Fiscal officer.

(a) The receipt must show the name of the beneficiary for whom the refund is made, the Social Security number, the beneficiary identification code (claims symbol), the amount of the refund, and the SSA trust fund number to which the refund amount should be credited.

(b) The trust funds and appropriation numbers are as follows:

<u>Trust</u>	<u>Appropriation</u>
RSI	75-20X8806
DI	75-20X8007
SMI	20X8004.5
SSI	75X0406

(c) If the post is in doubt about which trust number to use, the first one (RSI 75-20X8006) should be used.

(3) The Budget and Fiscal officer forwards such receipts on a flow basis to the Regional Administrative Management Centers (RAMC's) in Paris, Mexico City, and Bangkok, requesting those offices to credit the refund amounts to the appropriate SSA trust fund using transaction form SF-1221M.

**NOTE:** -- The RAMC, on a monthly basis, forwards a copy of form SF-1221M to the Department of the Treasury and forwards the original of the form SF-1221M with documentation (refund receipts) to:

Social Security Administration  
Division of Finance  
Post Office Box 47  
Baltimore, Maryland 21203

The Division of Finance in SSA immediately provides a copy of the form SF-1221M with the relevant documentation to the Division of International Operations (DIO). It is then processed through the existing SSA procedural steps to update the individual's overpayment amount, thereby reducing or eliminating the amount owed to SSA.

## **7 FAM 504.2-6 Control of Workload Assignments**

a. It is important that the consular officer prevent the development of improper employee-client relationships. To avoid conflicts of interest, an employee should not be permitted to assist with claims or other Federal benefits matters that involve close relatives or friends.

b. When staffing, grade levels, and position descriptions permit, it is highly desirable that assignments be made so that every type of work is known to 2 or more employees. If possible, it is also desirable to rotate assignments periodically so that no employee continuously handles the same workload segments. Such division and rotation of assignments will help to ensure that the work is performed objectively. Where specialization is unavoidable, the officer should monitor the work closely to ensure that it is being handled properly.

c. The Department has specific FSN job classifications and grade levels for FBU employees. Post personnel officers have copies of the Interagency Handbook on Local Employee Position Classification (LEPCH): Federal Benefits Series. Consular officers should acquaint themselves with these classifications when considering the reorganization of workloads and the responsibilities and training of FBU employees.

## **7 FAM 504.2-7 Control of Fieldwork**

a. As noted in section 7 FAM 506.11 , some posts have full-time field representatives who spend most of their time traveling while other posts do fieldwork only occasionally. Whatever the amount of fieldwork, the consular officer should monitor this activity.

b. Before starting a field trip, the employee should prepare a travel plan showing the casework to be performed, the localities to be visited, the planned visit schedule, and the estimated cost of the trip. Upon completion of the travel, the employee should prepare a trip report for the officer's review. The officer should obtain explanations of any significant deviations from the original plan.

c. Also, upon return from the trip, the employee should be required to expedite the preparation of a travel voucher. The officer should review the voucher carefully before approving it. When vehicles owned or leased by the Government are used for fieldwork, the consular officer should ensure that the vehicles are not misused by employees for personal activities.

d. At posts with more than one field investigator, it is suggested that the localities visited be rotated among the field representatives.

## **7 FAM 504.3 Fraud in Federal Benefits Cases**

### **7 FAM 504.3-1 Background**

a. Investigations have established that a certain amount of fraud affects Federal benefits payments abroad. A consular officer who interviews claimants and examines documents to determine identity, relationship, and eligibility should apply to benefits claims the same high standard used in resolving a claim to U.S. nationality or eligibility for a visa. The officer must be alert to altered documents, or to one that might be spurious, and request additional evidence, particularly if the document was issued in a locale where the reliability of public records is questionable. If primary evidence is not available from a reliable source, or if the required evidence has been destroyed, the officer should request and carefully evaluate the best available secondary evidence bearing on the point at issue.

b. The identity of a claimant and the validity of a claimed family relationship, on the basis of which a benefit is sought, should be questioned until doubts have been satisfied and satisfactory evidence has been presented. When it is necessary to appoint a guardian for a Federal beneficiary, the reliability and performance of a proposed guardian should be questioned to ensure that the ward is receiving the full value of benefits of payments made in the ward's name. The burden of proof rests with the claimant, who is expected to bear the cost of providing whatever evidence may reasonably be required to resolve the issue.

## **7 FAM 504.3-2 Reporting Fraud**

The consular officer reports to the Federal agency and the Department (CA/OCS/CCS) on any doubts that may arise about the identity, authenticity, or adequacy of documentation and on any other matters relating to fraud. Questions about the failure of a person to provide information as required to remain eligible for an award and any other questions that arise concerning eligibility should be reported directly to the interested agency. Reports should include the consular officer's evaluation of the authenticity of a document and the application (see chapter 14 of the Consular Anti-Fraud Handbook and section 7 FAM 504.1 a).

## **7 FAM 504.4 Assignment of Regional Federal Benefits Officers (FBO's)**

a. Because a major part of Federal benefits work involves services to social security beneficiaries and claimants, the Department has arranged for the assignment of Social Security officers to the Foreign Service as consular officers. These officers receive consular training at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) and are regular members of the consular sections at their posts.

b. Because their posts of assignment have a high volume of Federal benefits work and because of their special background, the FBO's have special responsibility for managing their own Federal benefits work and for providing operational advice and suggestions to posts within their assigned regions. The FBO visits the regional posts at regular intervals. Between visits, the FBO is available for consultation by telephone or telegram to officers who seek expert advice (see also section 7 FAM 530 ).

## **7 FAM 505 REVIEWING THE OPERATIONS**

### **7 FAM 505.1 Purpose of Reviews**

The consular officer should formally review the Federal benefits work as soon as possible after being assigned responsibility for the work and at least quarterly thereafter. The purpose of the review is to appraise the effectiveness and efficiency of the FBU. As supervisor of the FBU, the officer needs to be aware of its strengths and weaknesses and should make realistic plans for improving and sustaining its performance. Performance should be judged in relation to three basic goals:

- (1) public service;
- (2) integrity of benefit payments; and,
- (3) economy of administration.

## **7 FAM 505.2 Informal Discussions With the Employees**

a. The consular officer's best view of the work can be gained by talking to each employee separately at the employee's desk. Staff members should be allowed to explain their jobs in detail, and the officer should go over each step of the process with them. In these informal discussions, the officer encourages the employees to express their ideas and to suggest ways to improve the work process. Making a note of each suggestion, the supervising officer considers seriously what can be done to correct any problem and lets employees know that the officer will pursue any idea that will significantly improve the operations.

b. To the extent possible, discussion of the work process should be related to items of work on hand. The officer tries to become generally familiar with the types of work that each employee handles and learns where each type of work is located while awaiting processing, while in process, and after processing.

c. The officer tries to gain an idea of how each employee divides time among various types of work. Often an employee has assignments outside the FBU. Be aware of what these assignments are and how much time they require. Try to evaluate whether each employee has more or less work than can reasonably be handled. Review the employee's job description to see if it needs updating.

d. The officer makes realistic adjustments in work assignments if they appear desirable. It is highly desirable that assignments be so made that every type of work is divided between 2 or more employees. Assignments based on the letter of the alphabet with which the claimant's surname begins are ideally suited to this purpose.

## **7 FAM 505.3 Inventory of Pending Work**

The review should include a physical inventory of each item of work pending in the FBU. Such work should be tabulated by date received, action required, date initial action was taken, and dates when followup actions were taken. Special attention should be given to work that appears to have reached a dead end. Discuss with the staff how the dead ended work might be brought to a successful conclusion (as by use of the telephone or a field contact) or closed out in accordance with the procedures discussed in section 7 FAM 506.7 d.

## **7 FAM 505.4 Equipment and Supplies**

The consular officer should inventory the FBU's supply of forms, public information booklets, stationery, and other materials used by the FBU. Supplies should be maintained in reasonable quantities (not more than a year's supply) and be stored in a convenient location. The accessibility and condition of office equipment, such as typewriters, photocopy machines, file cabinets, office furniture, telephones, a date stamp which identifies the post, and the like, should be observed. The need for repair or replacement of equipment should be noted (see section 7 FAM 034 and 7 FAM 034.3 Appendix A).

## **7 FAM 505.5 Observation of Interviews**

The consular officer should sit in on a number of interviews conducted by FBU employees to assess the level of service being provided. The quality of the interviews should be judged by how the officer would want to be treated when having business with the FBU. Ideas for improving courtesy and sensitivity to human problems and for achieving greater efficiency and effectiveness of the interview should be noted for later discussion with the employees.

## **7 FAM 505.6 Observation of Fieldwork**

The consular officer should accompany each traveling FBU employee on at least one overnight field trip to see how the work is being accomplished. Attention should be given to the adequacy of the advance planning and preparation, the availability of needed forms and supplies, the employee's manner of dealing with the people contacted, the thoroughness of the interviews, and the clarity, completeness, objectivity, accuracy, and timely preparation of the report of contacts. The officer should also note the time it takes to travel, obtain accommodations, and accomplish the different kinds of fieldwork in order to gain insight into what is entailed in fieldwork at various outlying areas.

## **7 FAM 506 THE BASIC WORK PROCESS**

### **7 FAM 506.1 Overview**

The Department's Federal benefits work involves the payment of monthly benefits at the rate of over \$1.3 billion a year to some 420,000 beneficiaries in 130 foreign countries. The integrity of these payments is a matter of continuing concern to Congress and the American people, placing a heavy responsibility on the agencies and Foreign Service posts involved in the payment process.

### **7 FAM 506.2 The Federal Check Process**

#### **7 FAM 506.2-1 Coordination**

Most people who receive Federal benefits checks depend on them for their livelihood. No process is more important, therefore, than getting the right check to the right person at the right address each month. Any breakdown or delay in this process can cause serious problems for the people who depend on the monthly checks and serious public relations problems for the post.

## **7 FAM 506.2-2 Screening and Mailing**

Many posts play a crucial role in the distribution of monthly checks. The Department of the Treasury mails checks in bulk to the posts at the end of each month. Checks normally arrive between the 5th and the 10th of the following month. The FBU screens the checks against its records of recent changes of address and deaths (known as the OF-273 file; formerly the RO-35 file), redirects checks to new addresses, returns checks of deceased beneficiaries to the Department of the Treasury, and prepares the remaining checks for mailing. This usually involves affixing postage as well as addressing and mailing check envelopes. The list of checks that accompanies each check shipment is then annotated by the FBU to show the dates the checks were received and mailed and the disposition of rerouted checks. The FBU then keeps the lists for reference for 1 year.

## **7 FAM 506.2-3 Lost Bulk Shipment of Checks**

While the process is simple, many things can go wrong; therefore, the officer must monitor this operation closely. If a check shipment, or part of a shipment, does not arrive on time, the post must send a telegram to the Department of the Treasury, with information copies to the Directorate of Citizens Consular Services (CA/OCS/CCS) and to the agency involved. If the shipment or partial shipment cannot be located, Treasury will issue duplicate checks about the 25th of the month upon the post's confirmation that the checks are still missing. Meanwhile, the post must cope with the task of explaining the delay to all who inquire about their missing checks. If feasible, it may be useful to have the switchboard operator explain about check delays to all callers who ask for the FBU.

## **7 FAM 506.2-4 Misdirected Check Shipments**

If the post receives a shipment of checks that belongs to another post, the consular officer should remail the carton at once to the correct post by the fastest and most direct means possible and, at the same time, should notify the other post, CA/OCS/CCS, and the Department of the Treasury by telegram of the check numbers (first and last) in the misdirected or mislabeled carton and the method and routing of the reshipment of the checks to the correct post. Prompt teamwork avoids the problems connected with duplicate check issuances and assists the receiving post in calming its anxious clients.

## **7 FAM 506.2-5 Mail Strikes**

When local problems, such as mail strikes, arise, the post must make practical arrangements for delivery of checks at convenient pickup stations. The Department (CA/OCS/CCS) will coordinate the distribution efforts with Treasury, the paying agencies, and the pouch room.

## **7 FAM 506.2-6 Lost or Stolen Checks (Individual Cases)**

Individual complaints of the nonreceipt of checks are technical matters that are handled by FBU employees under established procedures. The actions taken vary, depending on whether the Treasury list of checks (see section 7 FAM 504.2 b ) shows that a check was issued and mailed to the individual. If so, after waiting a reasonable time for the missing check to pass through the local mail system, a statement of nonreceipt should be signed by the beneficiary (giving the claim number, the issue date, and amount of the check) and sent to the Department of the Treasury. The paying agency also should be notified of nonreceipt or loss of the check.

The paying agency and the Department of the Treasury take steps to issue a substitute check. In such cases, the post must inform the beneficiary that if the original check turns up after the substitute check is received, the original check must be returned to the post for return to the Department of the Treasury. The post must also warn the recipient that, if cashed, the check will not be honored because a stop-payment order is automatically placed on the original check when a substitute check is issued.

## **7 FAM 506.2-7 Checks Not Issued**

When there is a complaint of nonreceipt and the check is not on the Treasury list, the post should determine why no check was sent. Such steps include questioning the beneficiary about recent changes of personal status that would affect the beneficiary's right to payments and examining all pertinent information available at the post. For example, the Social Security Administration issues monthly reports of all additions to and subtractions from the social security payment rolls. These reports show the reason checks have been stopped. The post's records might show that the check was stopped because the beneficiary failed to return an enforcement questionnaire (see section 7 FAM 506.10 ) or to submit other evidence needed to support continued payment. If the reason for nonissuance cannot be determined, the post should send a telegram to the agency inquiring about the missing check. The agency handles such matters on a priority basis.

## **7 FAM 506.3 Communications With the Benefit Agencies**

### **7 FAM 506.3-1 Importance of Claim Number**

Every communication with a Federal benefits-paying agency about a claim must give the correct claim number. The agencies generally are unable to find the proper files without such numbers, and serious delays result.

### **7 FAM 506.3-2 Routine Correspondence**

Communications by mail are ordinarily by a self-routing Form OF-41 (Routing and Transmittal Slip), making memorandums necessary only in exceptional situations. If time is short, telegrams are used.

### **7 FAM 506.3-3 Delays in Replying**

Replies to agency requests should be as prompt as possible. If the post knows that a reply to an agency's request will involve an unusual delay, it should inform the agency and specify when a reply may be expected. Otherwise, the agency will routinely ask for a report of the status of action being taken on the case, causing extra work for the agency and the post. If the post experiences undue delays in response from an agency, the assistance of the Department (CA/OCS/CCS) should be requested.

## **7 FAM 506.4 New Claims**

### **7 FAM 506.4-1 Application Abroad**

Many people apply for Federal benefits while overseas. Sometimes this results from the death or disability of a worker or veteran in the United States. Some workers or veterans are overseas when they first meet the requirements for benefits. New claims and claims inquiries are processed by the post's FBU under procedures established by each agency.

### **7 FAM 506.4-2 Importance of Date Stamping**

All new claims or written inquiries about benefits must be stamped to show the date of receipt at the post. A person's right to retroactive benefits could be materially affected by failure to do so.

## **7 FAM 506.4-3 Development of Claims**

a. The Social Security Administration (SSA) has provided training to personnel at about 50 Foreign Service posts to enable them to fully develop social security claims during their first contact with a new claimant. This highly technical work involves documenting each type of claim with the evidence required to meet SSA standards. Posts that do not have personnel trained to develop social security claims should have the applicant complete a written statement instead of a formal application (see section 7 FAM 520 ).

b. Other agencies generally correspond directly with their claimants. Upon request, they have provided some posts with forms and instructions for assisting persons who wish to apply for benefits. The Social Security Administration does not stock application forms at posts where personnel have not been technically trained in their use.

## **7 FAM 506.5 Incoming Mail**

a. Incoming mail must be opened the same day as received, date stamped, and promptly assigned for action. Items that require action should be placed where they are easily visible to both the consular officer and the employee responsible for acting on them.

b. The types of incoming mail are discussed in subsections 7 FAM 506.6 through 7 FAM 506.8 .

## **7 FAM 506.6 Public Correspondence**

### **7 FAM 506.6-1 Routine Inquiries**

Letters, forms, and other documents that require action by the post's FBU are received by mail each day. Many inquiries can be answered by mailing appropriate booklets or leaflets to the inquirers. If necessary, a short letter or complimentary slip may be used. If a question can be answered only by the agency, the letter is acknowledged and referred to the agency for reply.

### **7 FAM 506.6-2 Reports From Beneficiaries That Affect Their Payments**

A letter of notice from a Federal benefit recipient reporting a change of address, the start or stop of work, marriage, death, cessation of school attendance, or any other event that affects benefit payments, must be processed promptly to ensure that required actions are taken to stop, start, or change the Federal benefit.

a. Form OF-273, Change in Status for Federal Agency Beneficiary (formerly form RO-35), generally is completed by the FBU to report changes of address and death to the agencies. The FBU files copies of this report in account order and uses them to process the monthly checks. When a check shows the new address or when a check for a deceased person is no longer included in a shipment of checks, the FBU removes the OF-273 (formerly RO-35) from its "action pending" file and may destroy it or hold it in an "action completed" file. See section 7 FAM 510 for a discussion of form OF-273.

b. Reports of other events that affect benefit rights are sent to the appropriate agencies for action.

c. To reduce the work of screening and redirecting checks, special arrangements have been made at certain posts for the use of the posts' telegraphic facilities to transmit routine changes of address, notices of beneficiary deaths, and reports of nonreceipt of checks. These arrangements enable the Social Security Administration to change or stop benefit checks before they are sent to the posts. If many OF-273's remain pending for more than 2 months at these "direct input" posts, supervisors should review and analyze the accuracy of the telegraphic messages.

d. Claims inquiries received by mail are processed as explained in section 7 FAM 506.4 .

## **7 FAM 506.7 Agency Requests for Services**

### **7 FAM 506.7-1 Types of Requests**

Federal agency requests for services are received by mail or by telegram. The agency specifies exactly what information or action is needed in each case and encloses any needed forms or questionnaires that are not stocked at the post. Among the more common requests from Federal agencies are those for:

- (1) Evidence of a claimant's age;
- (2) Proof of a claimant's relationship to, or dependency on, the worker;
- (3) Proof of a person's death;
- (4) Proof of school attendance;
- (5) Information to enable the selection of a representative payee (a person to receive payments for a minor or incapable adult beneficiary);
- (6) Arrangement for a medical examination to prove an alleged disability;
- (7) A field investigation of suspected fraud; and
- (8) An accounting from a representative payee showing how funds were used.

### **7 FAM 506.7-2 Actions on Agency Requests**

- a. Requests from agencies seldom can be disposed on in a single action.

Usually, the initial action is to send a letter, to telephone, or schedule a field contact. The type of action depends on what is needed and on the practicalities involved.

- b. If information needed from a claimant or beneficiary is quite involved, it usually can best be obtained at an interview. In such cases, the FBU generally writes or telephones and asks the claimant or beneficiary to come to the post, explains the reason for the visit, and specifies what documents should be brought along by the person to be interviewed.

- c. If the information needed is so simple that it could be obtained readily by mail or telephone, the FBU generally pursues that approach rather than asking the person to come in for an interview.

### **7 FAM 506.7-3 Importance of Controls and Followup**

- a. If the FBU has asked a claimant to come to the post for an interview, or has requested a reply by return mail or telephone, the FBU must keep a tickler file on the case. The case should be scheduled for review on a specified date that allows enough time for a response by the specified date.

- b. Prompt followup by mail or telephone must be made if there has been no response by the specified date.

- c. If there is no response to the followup by the next scheduled date, the FBU should send a closeout letter (as explained in section 7 FAM 506.7 d) or schedule the case for a field contact.

d. If the person who has not cooperated has nothing to lose by lack of cooperation (for example, a third party from whom information is required or a beneficiary being requested to repay an overpayment), a field contact usually is needed to obtain the required information.

## **7 FAM 506.7-4 Closeout Letters**

a. A closeout letter is used only if a claimant or beneficiary has failed to submit forms, information, or other evidence needed in support of a right to payments or other right under the law. Even in such cases, a field contact should be made if there is reason to believe that the claimant or beneficiary might not be able to act without assistance from the post.

b. The closeout letter should:

(1) Inform the claimant or beneficiary that the post has not received a reply to the request for the information or evidence needed in concerning a claim for benefits;

(2) Explain that if assistance is needed, the person should contact the FBU as soon as possible; and

(3) Advise that, if there is no response by a specified date, the post will assume that the claimant or beneficiary no longer wishes to pursue the claim or benefit, and the agency will be so notified.

c. When the FBU sends a closeout letter, it should schedule the case for another review after 15 days. If there is still no response, the request for assistance and related papers should be returned to the agency with an explanation of the efforts made. Copies of the letters sent to the claimant should be enclosed.

d. In such cases, the agency will disallow the claim or, if checks are still being issued, suspend the checks pending cooperation by the beneficiary. In either case, the agency will send a letter of explanation to the beneficiary's last known address. The FBU takes no other action on such cases unless requested to do so by the agency.

## **7 FAM 506.8 Congressional Correspondence**

Inquiries from a congressional committee or from a Member of Congress deserve immediate attention.

a. If the inquiry is about a matter involving broad policy, it should be referred to the Department (CA/OCS/CCS).

b. If it pertains to a case in which the FBU has been involved, the FBU should reply, taking into consideration the requirements of the Privacy Act, and send a copy of its reply to the agency concerned.

c. If the FBU needs information from an agency in order to reply, it should send a telegram to the agency or acknowledge the letter and refer it to the agency for reply.

d. H-Pass telegrams (see section 7 FAM 027.3 ) may be used, with information copies sent to the Department and the concerned agency.

## **7 FAM 506.9 Public Contacts**

### **7 FAM 506.9-1 Counter or Desk Interviews**

Some FBU's have a counter at which quick interviews can be conducted. This is an efficient way to complete simple transactions. More involved interviews and ones that require privacy should be held at the desk of a consular officer or Foreign Service national employee.

## **7 FAM 506.9-2 Advantages of Interviews**

a. Face-to-face interviews foster better communication and are probably the best fraud deterrent available. While these interviews generally are more time consuming than a visa or passport interview, they can save the agencies thousands of dollars in improper payments per claimant. They also offer the best opportunity to educate the public about their obligation to notify the post or agency of events that affect the right to payments.

b. Face-to-face interviews also obviate the need for third-party agents who sometimes charge exorbitant fees for helping claimants to pursue routine claims. For these reasons, persons who have business with the FBU should not normally be discouraged from coming to the post to conduct their business in person. People should be informed that free help is available at the post.

## **7 FAM 506.10 Enforcement Processes**

On a regular and recurring basis, some agencies require beneficiaries to complete questionnaires attesting to facts bearing on their continuing eligibility for monthly checks.

### **7 FAM 506.10-1 Social Security Enforcement Questionnaire**

Once a year, all social security beneficiaries abroad must complete a questionnaire, Report to the U.S. Social Security Administration (form FFS-7162), that asks about work, marriage, and other events that affect eligibility for social security checks.

a. SSA sends the forms to the FBU at the larger posts for mailing to the beneficiaries but mails the questionnaires directly to the beneficiaries in consular districts with fewer than 500 beneficiaries.

b. FBU's use a set of punchcards furnished by SSA to control outstanding questionnaires. If there has been no response after 45 days, the FBU's send followups to the beneficiaries.

c. Questionnaires returned to an FBU must be examined for completeness and returned to SSA with the related punchcard by a specified date.

d. SSA processes the returned punchcards and later asks the FBU to confirm claim numbers of persons who did not complete questionnaires.

e. Payments are eventually suspended if the FBU receives no response from the beneficiary.

### **7 FAM 506.10-2 Other Agency Questionnaires**

a. The Veterans Administration (VA) sends income questionnaires to its beneficiaries. The questionnaires are no longer sent with the benefit checks but the FBU will be asked to distribute them for audit control purposes. An accompanying information card written in five languages advises the beneficiaries to seek assistance from the FBU if required.

b. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) asks its beneficiaries to complete questionnaires that are mailed directly to them and to return the completed questionnaires to OPM by direct mail.

## **7 FAM 506.10-3 People Who Request Assistance**

Some people come to a post for help in completing the questionnaire. Such persons should be interviewed, asked to prove their identity, and be assisted in completing the forms. The FBU interviewer should sign the SSA questionnaire as the witness.

## **7 FAM 506.10-4 Reevaluation of Disability Cases**

a. SSA pays special attention to disability cases and is required by law to reassess a beneficiary's medical condition every 3 years. The final regulations that will govern the review process have not been completed, but SSA probably will ask posts to arrange for reexaminations only for beneficiaries whose case histories indicate possibilities of recovery. Department of Labor (DOL) Black Lung cases are not now, and are not expected to be, redeveloped once a disability claim has been awarded because, according to DOL, Black Lung disease is progressive and can only get worse.

b. At a minimum, officers should spot check disability claims to ensure that all examination forms are complete and that costs, which are borne by the agencies, are reasonable for the locale where the examinations were performed. Final determinations on claims can only be made by the individual agencies, but officers should be alert to contradictory statements by consultants and the primary physician. An unusually high incidence of similar disability claims from one geographic area or physician may also be cause for special inquiry.

## **7 FAM 506.10-5 Onsite Reviews and Validation Surveys**

From time to time, SSA sends onsite review teams abroad to keep its headquarters staff informed of overseas operations and to suggest ways to improve internal office control procedures. Each year SSA conducts indepth validation surveys in 3 to 6 countries that have significant beneficiary populations. The surveys involve unannounced visits to beneficiaries and local records offices. The SSA survey teams also investigate cases for the Veterans Administration and the Office of Personnel Management.

## **7 FAM 506.11 Field Investigations**

### **7 FAM 506.11-1 When Required**

Not all Federal benefits work can be done in the office. Some matters require on-the-scene observation or interviews with persons at other locations. Firsthand inspection of public records is sometimes needed to verify the authenticity and accuracy of certifications from the records. Inspection of a farming operation might be needed to see whether it is a trade, business, or noncommercial activity. It is often necessary to visit a minor or adult beneficiary in the home environment to see if the beneficiary is well cared for and appears to be receiving the full value of the benefits expended on the beneficiary's behalf. Outside contacts also are needed when information must be obtained from a person who does not respond to mail or telephone requests.

## **7 FAM 506.11-2 How Performed**

a. Generally fieldwork can be performed by a technically trained FSN, under the general supervision and control of the consular officer. When a trip is being planned, the officer should seek answers to such questions as these:

- (1) Does the employee have appropriate identification?
- (2) What is the itinerary?
- (3) Who is to be contacted at each location?
- (4) Would an advance appointment be advisable?
- (5) What information or evidence is to be obtained?
- (6) Are other cases pending in the office which, while normally handled by mail, could be handled more efficiently as part of the same field trip?
- (7) Does the employee have a supply of all the forms and reference material that may be needed?
- (8) Should the employee call in at an agreed time to report progress?

b. Some posts have full-time investigators who spend most of their time on the road. Others have only an occasional need for fieldwork. Posts that have large consular sections especially posts with FBO's could provide valuable training by having a junior consular officer or any other consular officer accompany a field representative from time to time. The officer will become aware of the kinds of decisions the FBU staff must make.

## **7 FAM 506.11-3 Travel Expenses**

a. Normally, the expenses of travel necessary to perform Federal benefits work are covered by the post's budgeted travel funds.

b. If travel money is not available for a field trip needed to conduct Social Security Administration business, the consular officer may request authorization for travel at SSA expense from the regional Federal Benefits Officer (see section 7 FAM 506.1 a), where there is one, or from SSA headquarters (see section 7 FAM 504.2 d(5)). Information copies of such requests should be sent to CA/OCS/CCS.

c. Cars needed for travel are usually obtained from the post's motor pool.

However, it may sometimes be necessary to use rented or privately-owned vehicles and, in some situations, public transportation when it is more efficient than travel by automobile.

## **7 FAM 506.12 Fraud Prevention**

### **7 FAM 506.12-1 Spurious Documents**

One of the FBU's primary functions is to prevent fraud, and its first line of defense is alertness to spurious documents.

a. Any erasure, alteration, or other irregularity that brings the document into question must be investigated carefully.

b. Questionable certifications of public records can usually be verified by visiting the civil registrar's office and examining the source record. The person who examines the record should note whether the original record is entered in chronological order in the proper record book and whether the entry appears to be authentic and unaltered. Firsthand verification may also be necessary when certifications of church records appear to be questionable. Careful attention must be given to cards or documents offered by beneficiaries as proof of their identity as well as to other types of documentary evidence related to a claim.

c. Visa, passport, and INS staffs may have useful information on fraudulent documentation. Consular supervisors should ensure that this information is shared regularly and to the greatest extent possible.

## **7 FAM 506.12-2 Misrepresentation**

The post must be alert to the possibility of misrepresentation or concealment of facts that bear on a person's eligibility for benefits. Any contradictory statements or otherwise questionable allegations must be checked against other evidence. Skilled interviewing is particularly important in discovering contradictions and uncovering fraud. Early detection of fraud can save agencies thousands of dollars per claimant.

## **7 FAM 506.12-3 Informants**

Tips from third parties must be checked. For example, if an anonymous letter alleges that a person receiving social security benefits is working (and thus may be ineligible for the benefits), a field investigation should be arranged to check the facts.

## **7 FAM 506.12-4 Corroborative Evidence Requested by Agencies**

Fraud prevention is the objective when agencies request corroborative evidence from schools, employers, doctors, or other third parties. The careful reviews involved in the enforcement processes (see section 7 FAM 506.10) serve as part of the post's fraud prevention effort.

## **7 FAM 506.12-5 Unreported Deaths**

If a beneficiary's death was not reported promptly, confirmation of the exact date of death should be obtained and inquiry should be made as to who has been cashing checks issued after the death occurred. Carefully documented reports of the facts in all such cases should be made to the agencies concerned.

## **7 FAM 506.12-6 Other Preventive Measures**

Officers should also:

(1) Investigate any significant increase in claims from relatively small geographic areas. This may indicate the presence of a "claims fixer."

(2) Explore the possibilities of rotating the responsibilities of the FBU staff. At larger posts, this would provide cross training and make it more difficult for applicants to make dishonest approaches to consular staffs.

(3) Review disability claims. Determine if a group of claimants exhibit an unusually high prevalence of similar symptoms. Are there too many standardized "clincher statements" that might ensure payments?

(4) Control strictly the access to and handling of checks. If possible, one employee should be responsible for checks. Checks awaiting distribution should be stored securely and away from the general public.

(5) Review address changes and returned Treasury checks, since they both may be first indicators of fraud. Unusual requests to pick up checks, "care of" addresses (c/o), and requests to give the checks to others than the payee may also suggest fraud.

(6) Consider the use of medical clinics which provide several specialties.

Clinic doctors will eventually develop better understanding of agencies' requirements, standards and procedures.

(7) Ascertain whether doctors' and consultants' fees are reasonable. Would a clinic provide services at a lower rate?

(8) Review regularly the OF-273 file. Are change of address requests and death notices handled promptly and are they properly documented?

(9) Review backlogs. Ideally, work should be completed and returned to the requesting agency within 30 days of receipt. Are suspicious cases regularly submitted to the post's fraud officer and handled promptly? Are field investigation requests becoming "aged"?

(10) Posts where Federal Benefits Officers are stationed should consider using junior officers as deputies to the FBO's to enable them to develop consular expertise in these programs. Further, because FBO's are away from their offices as much as 50 percent of the time, trained junior officers would provide American supervision in the absence of FBO's.

(11) Make sure that the security officer at post changes safe combinations at least once a year, as specified in the Department's security regulations (see 5 FAM 572 in either the FAM volume or the reprint excerpted from the FAM).

NOTE: Essentially, these suggestions call for greater participation in and supervision of the Federal benefits program by consular officers. This is not meant to impugn the integrity of the FSN employees. Rather, the suggestions are intended to ensure closer supervisory attention to the program and will make it easier for consular employees to refuse bribes and other compromises to the payment programs.

## **7 FAM 506.13 Social Security Numbers**

### **7 FAM 506.13-1 Need for Numbers**

People abroad sometimes have occasion to apply for social security cards. The process involves ascertaining the person's need for an account number, helping the person to fill out the Application for a Social Security Number Card (form SS-5), and obtaining documentary evidence as required by the Social Security Administration. The SS-5 and supporting documents are then sent to SSA with an explanation of why the person needs a number. SSA processes the application and mails the card directly to the applicant.

### **7 FAM 506.13-2 Following Up**

Even when the procedures are applied carefully and applications are properly completed and routed, a month or so elapses before the applicant receives the card. Posts should allow 60 days before following up on applications for account numbers. If there has been no response after 60 days, another SS-5 should be completed and supporting evidence obtained, since it may be assumed that the first application has been lost. The material should be mailed directly to the same office as the original application with a brief note explaining why the number is needed and that the initial application was sent 60 days earlier. SSA will give such applications priority attention. For details on the application process, see section 7 FAM 520 .

## **7 FAM 507 DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED**

### **7 FAM 507.1 Review of Documents**

Applications and documents should be reviewed at the FBU for completeness and legibility before they are sent to the appropriate Federal agency. Incomplete or illegible forms and documents will be returned directly to the claimant or to the post for completion or clarification.

### **7 FAM 507.2 Translations**

Posts should encourage applicants and claimants to submit authorized translations of foreign-language documents with their applications or claims for benefits. Except for the Social Security Administration, which has its own translation service, posts or claimants should provide translations whenever possible. This is particularly true for VA-reimbursed treatment and medication. Translation of foreign language documents will expedite claims processing and help to reduce followup inquiries by the claimant and the post.

### **7 FAM 507.3 Changes of Address**

Federal agencies have usually required beneficiaries to submit a request for change of address over their own signature. The request (in the form of a letter or on a special form provided by the agency) should be submitted by the beneficiary through the open mails directly to the agency concerned (see sections 7 FAM 506.6 b and 7 FAM 504.2 d(5) for further details).

### **7 FAM 507.4 Return of Reports**

Reports should be completed promptly and returned directly to the agency. When a number of cases are being processed simultaneously or when the FBU receives completed questionnaires requested by the Federal agency (for example, Form FFS-7162, Report to U.S. Social Security Administration; VA annual income questionnaires; and OPM widow's questionnaires), the FBU should return the forms to the appropriate agency on a frequent and regular basis by the quickest possible means. Claimant and beneficiaries should be advised that any undue delay on their part in meeting an agency's requirements for submission of material may result in the delay, suspension, or denial of benefits.

### **7 FAM 507.5 Interim Reports**

Many services requested by other Federal agencies require interviews or other actions that depend on the response of a third party. To avoid agency complaints about delays in responding to their requests, the post should, without waiting for agency requests to do so:

- (1) Follow up locally on each request that has been outstanding for 30 days or more after its receipt at the post;

(2) Send a status report directly to the agency on each request that has been outstanding for 60 days;

(3) Follow up locally again on each request that has been outstanding for 60 days; and,

(4) Send a more detailed status report to the agency on each request that has been outstanding for 75 days.

## **7 FAM 507.6 Service That Cannot Be Performed**

As soon as it learns that a requested service cannot be performed or that required documentation cannot be obtained, the post should send a detailed report of all the facts in the case directly to the requesting agency by memorandum, subject: Federal Agencies (name of agency). See also section 7 FAM 506.7 d.

## **7 FAM 508 COMMUNICATION**

### **7 FAM 508.1 Communication with Other Federal Agencies**

#### **7 FAM 508.1-1 Requests for Services**

All communications about a request for services shall, at the post's discretion, be confined to the post and the action office of the agency that requests the service. The Department enters a case only when the requested service:

- (1) Involves matters of policy;
- (2) Involves unduly delayed agency action on a case;
- (3) Requires security classification or administrative control to protect the post or the agency in a specific action;
- (4) Involves resource requirements and funding; or,
- (5) Involves differences about the service performed that cannot be resolved by direct communication between the post and the agency.

#### **7 FAM 508.1-2 Claim or Account Number**

The FBU must ensure that the beneficiary's claim or account number is on every piece of correspondence sent to another Federal agency. Records at all agencies must be kept by claim or account number, not by the name of the person. Reports that omit these numbers cannot be linked with the proper files.

### **7 FAM 508.2 Forms of Communication**

#### **7 FAM 508.2-1 Agency-Prepared Reply Forms**

Use reply forms prepared by agencies when they are submitted with a request for services.

#### **7 FAM 508.2-2 Memorandum**

Use the memorandum to the extent possible. The text is informal and may be in telegraphic style, and the form may be addressed directly to the agency concerned (for example, TO: Social Security Administration). It is not necessary to send copies of the memorandum to the Department.

### **7 FAM 508.2-3 Transmittal Slip**

When appropriate and the message will fit into the space available on the form, use Optional Form 41 (Routing and Transmittal Slip) to forward material.

### **7 FAM 508.2-4 Telegram**

Send a telegram only when a matter is so urgent that alternative means of communication would be unsatisfactory. Indiscriminate use of telegrams for other than urgent messages or only to attract attention will lessen the value of telegrams as a means for commanding an urgent response.

a. Telegrams about individual cases from a post to another Federal agency should be addressed directly to the agency (see section 7 FAM 520 ; for example:

RUSAFZO/SSA/DIO Baltimore). If the Department is to receive an information copy, caption it for the agency with an information copy to the Department. The telegraphic addresses of the agencies are published in the Joint Armed Forces Publication, ACP 117, a copy of which is available at post.

b. Telegrams about policies or procedures should be sent through Department of State channels.

### **7 FAM 508.3 Classification or Administrative Control Designations**

To the greatest extent possible, avoid the use of classified or administrative control designations in communicating with Federal agencies. The files of Federal agencies are legally protected from access by unauthorized persons, but the operating employees of the agencies that administer Federal benefits programs are usually not cleared for handling classified or administratively controlled material. Likewise, the agencies are not adequately equipped to store such material.

### **7 FAM 508.4 Name of Month To Be Written**

To eliminate confusion in Federal benefits cases, the name of the month, or its abbreviation, is to be written for all dates. The month may appear before or after the day, but numerals are not to be used to indicate the month.

### **7 FAM 508.5 Return of Undeliverable Material**

After reasonable efforts have been made to effect delivery, all correspondence, forms, and other documents that are not deliverable to the addressee are to be returned, along with a brief explanation of the reasons for nondelivery, to the office of the Federal agency from which the material was received.

### **7 FAM 508.6 Requesting Federal Agency Forms**

The Washington Regional Supply Center Stock Catalog lists some forms published by other Federal agencies that are frequently used at posts. When a needed form is not obtainable through the supply catalog, the post should request it, by memorandum, directly from the appropriate agency.

## **7 FAM 508.7 Agency Failure To Reply**

If an agency fails to reply to a post communication within 90 days, the post should send a followup telegram or memorandum directly to the agency with an information copy to the Department, subject: Federal Agencies (name of agency). If a telegram is used, be as explicit as possible. If a memorandum is used, enclose copies of the original communication with completed forms as appropriate. If the post still has not received a reply within a reasonable time, direct the next communication to the Department (CA/OCS/CCS), with the agency as an information addressee.

## **7 FAM 509 PUBLIC RELATIONS**

### **7 FAM 509.1 Overview**

a. The public relations concerns of the officer in charge of an FBU primarily involve relations with (1) the claimants (people with rights and obligations under Federal benefits laws), (2) the Federal agencies, and (3) local organizations and officials whose continuing cooperation is needed in carrying out Federal benefits work.

b. The consular officer's basic concern is to establish and maintain clear and open channels of communication with each of these groups and to promote constructive working relationships with them.

### **7 FAM 509.2 The Claimants**

#### **7 FAM 509.2-1 The Service Concept**

The function of the FBU is to serve those who have a right to benefits under Federal laws. These people have a right to expect prompt service of high quality, provided in a courteous, friendly, and helpful manner. The way that Federal laws are administered determines, almost as much as the laws themselves, what the concept of "individual right" means in practice. The quality of service provided by the FBU has a definite influence on how the people who deal with the FBU feel about the U.S. Government.

#### **7 FAM 509.2-2 Public Contacts**

Contact with the public involves more than personal, mail, and telephonic communications. Attractive, well-located signs directing people to the FBU and appropriate telephone listings are helpful. "Groups" of claimants can also be reached through local organizations, such as the American Legion, which can inform interested people about the help available free of charge at the FBU, the hours the FBU is open to the public, or the days when the post is closed for holidays. The consular officer should see that information needed by Federal benefits recipients and claimants reaches them on time.

#### **7 FAM 509.2-3 Use of the Public Media**

a. It is rarely necessary or wise to transmit Federal benefits information through the public media. In the foreign environment, initiatives for using the public media for disseminating information about Federal benefits should be exercised only when a well-defined grouping of people who have both a legitimate interest and a need-to-know can be reached.

b. It is never wise to canvass blindly for applications for Federal benefits in foreign countries. There is an ever-present danger of misleading people who have no connection with the Federal benefits programs into believing that they can apply for and receive benefits. Generally, the attention attracted should be no more than that which is incidental to fulfillment of the basic responsibilities of the Federal benefits programs. Public information activities related to Federal benefits programs should, of course, be coordinated with the post's public affairs officer and the agencies concerned.

c. The consular officer should be alert to situations where use of the public media would be appropriate. For example, if it should become necessary to make special arrangements for beneficiaries to pick up their checks during mail strikes, information on how to get the checks usually can be provided with good success through the public media.

## **7 FAM 509.3 The Federal Agencies**

### **7 FAM 509.3-1 Importance of Good Communication**

Federal agencies rely on the posts for timely and accurate technical work needed for the administration of their programs. Excellent performance in the FBU is possible only if the technical requirements of each agency are clearly understood. The consular officer should realize that, because of the complexity of the laws and regulations administered by each agency, there are many opportunities for breakdowns in communication.

### **7 FAM 509.3-2 Resolving Technical Problems**

The officer is not expected to be expert in all the Federal laws or agency regulations and policies that govern Federal benefits, but the officer should see that technical problems and misunderstandings are promptly referred to the appropriate agencies for resolution. The regional Federal benefit officers (FBO's) are responsible for resolving procedural problems and/or for processing individual cases. If the post is not served by a regional FBO, the consular officer should refer such matters directly to the agency concerned. If that does not get results, the consular officer should seek the assistance of the Directorate for Citizens Consular Services (CA/OCS/CCS).

### **7 FAM 509.3-3 Expressing Disagreement With Agency Requests**

If the consular officer believes that an agency's request for services is unreasonable, the Department (CA/OCS/CCS) should be advised. The Department is willing to intercede on the post's behalf, but as much information as possible on the problem should be provided.

## **7 FAM 509.4 Local Organizations and Officials**

Federal benefits work depends on the continuing cooperation and good will of various entities in the foreign country. Included among these are such government officials as postal officials, civil registrars, law enforcement officers, and such other public and private entities as schools, hospitals, employers, doctors, and churches. The consular officer must establish contacts in the organizations with which the FBU has frequent dealings and do whatever is possible to promote smooth working relationships.

# **7 FAM 510 UNASSIGNED**

*(TL:CON-9; 9-15-84)*